

JOHN CALVIN - TRUE PRESBYTERIAN



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John Calvin was born a Roman Catholic in 1509. When he was eight, the Lutheran Reformation started in Germany. When he was twelve, he became a Roman Catholic Chaplain. And when he was eighteen, he was appointed a Curate. At that time, the religious young Calvin had no appreciative interest in the Protestant Reformation whatsoever.

Upon hearing of the Reformation, Calvin instinctively disliked it. He reacted against it. He inquisitively read the Bible in order to refute Luther and to confirm his own Roman Catholicism. But in so doing, by the grace of God Calvin was suddenly converted to Christ.

Continuing to pursue his theological studies in earnest, he became more and more convinced that Protestantism and not Romanism was in fact the true Christian religion. Accordingly, he began to preach the necessity of reforming the Church of Christ.

Predictably, persecution broke out. Calvin was forced to flee his native France - forever. But the Lord would preserve him elsewhere - in the wilderness. For God had predestinated Calvin to become the Re-former of the Christian Church and the Re-constructor of the Ancient Church's Presbyterianism.

As during Biblical and Early-Patristic times,¹ many of the early Protestants amongst the various Pre-Calvinian Reformation groups in France and Switzerland and Italy had held to a system of Church Government by popularly-chosen yet divinely-appointed Elders.² These groups were generally organized into Congregations ruled by Sessions consisting of several Ruling Elders or 'Presbyters' - including a Presiding Teaching Elder or Preacher. Presbyters representing their Session, sometimes met together with Presbyters representing other Sessions - in a flexible Confederacy called a Classis or Presbytery.³ Hence the term "Presbyterian" - a system of Church Government by Sessional Presbyters loosely confederated together into Regional Presbyteries.

When Calvin was twenty-six, he wrote an address to the Roman Catholic Sovereign, Francis King of France - pleading for tolerance toward French Protestants. Together with that address, Calvin included a statement of Presbyterian Doctrine for the king's perusal. That statement, subsequently expanded into Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is the systematic handbook of Biblical Doctrine which has been used by all true Presbyterians throughout the World - for ever since.

We ourselves are persuaded as to the essential Scripturalness and efficiency of the Calvinistic and Presbyterian system of Biblical Doctrine and Church Government. We propose to deal with it in this booklet.

First, we shall deal with Calvin the Presbyterian's relationship to his Fellow-Presbyters on his Local Session and in neighboring cities. Second, we shall deal with the Pastor's or Preaching Presbyterian's relationship with his own flock or Congregation. Third, we shall deal

with Calvin the Irenicist's efforts to promote peace even among Non-Calvinistic Christians. Fourth, we shall deal with Calvin the Polemicist's exposures of the errors of Romanism. And fifth, we shall deal with Calvin the Evangelist's relationship to the whole World at large.

I.. CALVIN THE PRESBYTER

"The Elders which are among you I exhort - I who am also an Elder... Likewise, you younger ones, submit yourselves to the Elder!"⁴ Thus spoke the Apostle Peter. He, far from ruling over God's heritage like a Romish Pope,⁵ regarded himself merely as a Fellow-Elder, co-equal to all the others. Indeed, he also regarded himself as equally obliged to execute the pastoral duty of feeding the flock - and leading especially the younger Christians.⁶

Calvin's view was essentially the same as Peter's. The Genevan Reformer passionately believed in "the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of the saints."⁷ He loved to enjoy that communion - also with his Fellow-Presbyters at the sessional level. And he eagerly attended every meeting of the Session each week, in order properly to administer pastoral care to the Members of his Congregation in Geneva.

As Preaching Elder and Moderator or President of the Session of the Congregation, Calvin never drove but always led his Fellow-Elders. "We are trustees of the Oracles of God," he declared - and "by God's grace, we are to lead the World."⁸ This was to be done by the Session's exercise of the power of the keys,⁹ and especially by the Preaching Elder's and the Ruling Elders' visitation of the Members of the Congregation "from house to house, reminding each individually of the doctrine of salvation."¹⁰ For both Preaching Elders and Ruling Elders - are Presbyter-Bishops or Overseers. They are both Presbyters or Elders and Bishops or Overseers at one and the same time.¹¹

This does, of course, imply that the Presbyters were appointed over the Congregation Members, even though elected by them. Accordingly, Calvin could write of the Session that "we are overseers by free mercy."¹²

It is true that the Presbyterian system knows nothing of essential superiors and inferiors, but only of functional responsibility delegated to various popularly-chosen Church Officers of the Local Congregation by Jesus Christ Himself. Yet the Presbyters are to be Overseers. For they are to correct all serious public sin in the lives of the Members of the Congregation. Indeed, a good example of this sessional oversight occurred - when the Elders of Geneva would not allow the blasphemous drunkard Philibert Berthelier to profane the Lord's Supper.¹³

Never, however, did Calvin rebuke Congregation Members in an attempt to get even with them for motives of personal revenge. It is well-known that Calvin was harshly driven out of town by certain carnal Members of the Congregation of Geneva in 1538. But, after being reinstated as Pastor in Geneva during 1541, Calvin graciously stated:

"I value the public peace and concord so highly, that I lay restraint upon myself.... On my arrival it was in my power to have disconcerted our enemies most triumphantly.... I have abstained. If I had liked, I could daily, not merely with impunity but with the approval of very many, have used sharp reproof. I forbear. Even with the most scrupulous care, do I avoid

everything of the kind - lest if even by some slight word I should appear to persecute any individual.”¹⁴

Calvin was successful in leading both his Session and his Congregation - for one very simple reason. Although by far the most learned of all the Presbyters, he was at heart a transparently humble man devoid of any personal arrogance. Believing with Augustine that the three most important precepts of Christianity are humility and humility and humility,¹⁵ Calvin could say with John the Baptist: ‘Christ must increase, and I must decrease!’¹⁶ And Calvin himself did in fact say: ‘We must willingly reduce ourselves to nothing, so that Christ may fill the entire World with His rays. The greatest honour in the Church is not domination but ministry’¹⁷ alias service.

Wrote Calvin: ‘He who is truly humble - presumes nothing in himself before God; does not despise his fellow-man with disdain; does not claim to be more worthy than others; but is content to be one of the Members of the body of Christ, asking only that the Saviour be praised.... Only humility elevates us and makes us noble.’¹⁸

Truly humble as Calvin was, he nevertheless also deplored all false ‘humility’ (*sic*). ‘Man doubtless has been made subject to vanity.... Man is nothing [before God]. And yet: how is he whom God exalts, utterly nothing? How is he nothing, to whom a divine heart has been given? Let us breathe again, brethren! Although we are nothing in our heart, perhaps something of us may lurk in the heart of God.... I have not forgotten myself when, with fear and reverence, I say, we are - are in the heart of God! We are - by His dignifying; not by our own dignity!’¹⁹

Whenever Calvin voted in the minority on his Session, he graciously accepted the majority opinion of his Fellow-Elders. He never sought to inflict his own views upon them where he failed to convince them of the Scripturalness of his own proposed line of action. This was not difficult for Calvin. For ‘the man who knows himself, has little self-esteem - the realization of his own sin gives him a tolerance and a love of others.’²⁰

Especially during his first period in Geneva, Calvin did not always get his own way. This sometimes hurt his feelings so deeply, that he later referred back to that period as a time of his being broken on the rack. But Calvin rose above his setbacks magnificently. For the rule of the Holy Spirit, he said, ‘is that each should yield and give up his own right - so that we should seek rather to edify our neighbour in his eternal interests, than consult our own selfish desires.’²¹

‘The highest wisdom, even of him who has attained the greatest perfection, is to go forward and endeavour in a calm and teachable spirit to make further progress.... God keeps us modest, assigning to each a measure of faith - so that every teacher, however excellent, may still be disposed to learn.’²² For ‘until we have learned to submit to our brothers, we do not acknowledge that Christ is the Master’²³ of our lives.

Striking indeed were Calvin’s dying words to the Council of Geneva: ‘If I have not always done what I should, please consider the desire the fact!.... I think, sirs, that you have borne patiently with my vehemence and my vices - which I detest. But God has also

supported me. My refuge is in a Father of mercy Who is and shows Himself to be a Father - even to so miserable a sinner!”²⁴

What was the secret of Calvin’s leadership in his Session? Calvin loved his Session. And his Session loved Calvin. “There is charity - only where there is voluntary servitude and help for our neighbours,” he declared.²⁵

“No one will be benign and warm-hearted - except the modest and unassuming man stripped of all pride.”²⁶ For “we must know our faults - and be humble, because of them. Yet we must excuse the faults of others. Like Christ, we must prefer others to ourselves.”²⁷

No wonder, then, that in preaching he so easily moved his Session and the whole Congregation to tears! For his humility and his sincerity were very transparent.

Calvin was not only humble toward his Fellow-Presbyters in the Session of his own Congregation. He was humble also toward Pastors and Presbyters of other neighbouring Congregations much less gifted than he.

For what he considered to be Biblical reasons, Calvin himself strongly disapproved of chanting during Church Worship. Yet he did not hesitate to defend his Fellow-Presbyterian Preacher Martin Bucer in overwhelmingly-Lutheran Northern Germany for making allowances there for such less-Reformed ‘Lutheran’ observances.

In a letter about Bucer’s tolerance - a letter written to the puritanically-strict Presbyterian Guillaume Farel - Calvin stated: “There is no occasion to fear that he would be for restoring those things which have once been abolished, such as the mass. It is only that Bucer ‘cannot endure that, on account of these trifling observances’ such as chanting, ‘we should be separated from Luther. Neither, certainly, do I consider them to be just causes for dissent’”²⁸ - requiring the breaking off of fellowship.

Again, Calvin advised Presbyterian refugees to accept the somewhat incorrect idiosyncrasies prevalent in their new places of worship. “We do not hold lighted candles in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, nor figured bread, to be indifferent things.... But - should our lot be cast in some place where a different form prevails, there is not one of us who from spite against a candle or chasuble would consent to separate himself from the body of the Church and so deprive himself of the use of the Sacrament.”²⁹

Even when dying, Calvin did not hesitate to confess his faults to his Fellow-Pastors. “You have had to endure many of my infirmities.... I am a miserable creature! I can say, however, that I have had good intentions, and my vices have always tormented me. Fear of God has been in my heart. And you can say that my desires have been good. I pray that my sins will be pardoned. But if there is any good [in me] - I hope that you will conform to it and follow it!”³⁰

How could Calvin’s Fellow-Presbyters help loving and respecting him? How could any modern Christ-loving Christian malign such a man?

II. CALVIN THE PASTOR

Calvin bore in mind that Ruling Elders are to help their Presiding Presbyter (the Preaching Elder) to rule Christ's Church and to comfort His children. Accordingly, Calvin insisted that Christ 'has appointed Pastors-and-Teachers by whose lips He might edify His people (Ephesians 4:11). He has invested them with authority and - in short - omitted nothing that might conduce to holy consent in the Faith and to right Order."³¹

God would have His Church grow by regular preaching and regular visitation - slowly but surely, rather than by magic or miracle. For faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by listening to the official proclamation (in public and in private) of the Word of God.³² So that all who reject the spiritual food offered them by the Ambassadors of the Church, deserve to perish.³³

Calvin fully realized that there are many hypocrites and weak Christians in Christ's Church, together with the "strong" - and he hardly regarded himself as strong in his own strength. The hypocrites, however, are known to God alone. Accordingly, the Ruling Elders and the Preaching Elders must minister to all the Members indiscriminately.

The Members, in their turn, need to submit to the rule of the Session. But even so, the Elders must be prepared to tolerate much imperfection of conduct on the part of the Members - without ever condoning it.³⁴

As Calvin insisted,³⁵ "even the good are sometimes affected by inconsiderate zeal for righteousness." However, "we shall find that this excessive moroseness is more the result of pride and a false idea of sanctity, than genuine sanctity itself and true zeal for it.... Let them reflect that of those who seem diseased, there are many who are far from taking pleasure or flattering themselves in their faults and who, ever and anon aroused by a serious fear of the Lord, aspire to greater integrity! Let them reflect that they have no right to pass judgment on a man for one act - since the holiest sometimes make the most grievous fall!"

For this reason - and also because even the Ruling Elders and the Preaching Elders are fellow-sinners - every Church Member, even the most carnal, should be encouraged to speak his mind to the Office-bearers of the Church. Indeed, every effort should be made to improve the situation of the Congregation.

Held Calvin:³⁶ "If we strive to reform what is offensive, we act in the discharge of duty. To this effect are the words of Paul, 'If anything be revealed to another that sits by, let the first hold his peace! First Corinthians 14:30. From this it is evident that to each Member of the Church, according to his measure of grace, the study of public edification has been assigned - provided it be done decently and in order. In other words, we must neither renounce the communion of the Church nor, continuing in it, disturb peace and discipline when duly arranged."

The Session in particular, however, should minister to the needs of every Member of the Congregation. For God, argues Calvin,³⁷ "uses the ministry of men by making them as it were His substitutes - not by transferring His right and honour to them, but only by doing His Own work by their lips.... Secondly, it forms a most excellent and useful training to humility when

He accustoms us to obey His Word though preached by men like ourselves - or, it may be, our inferiors in worth. But when a feeble man sprung from the dust speaks in the Name of God, we give the best proof of our piety and obedience by listening with docility to His Servant - though that Servant is not in any respect our superior.”

Indeed, ‘Christ ‘ascended up far above all Heavens, so that He might fill all things.’ Ephesians 4:10. The mode of filling, is this: By the Ministers, to whom He has committed this Office and given grace to discharge it, He dispenses and distributes His gifts to the Church.... Whoever, therefore, studies to abolish this order and kind of Government of which we speak, or discharges it as [if it were] of minor importance - plots the devastation or rather the ruin and destruction of the Church.

‘But what shall we say of Pastors?’ Referring primarily to Preaching Elders - but by no means to the complete exclusion also of Ruling Elders - Calvin replies that ‘the two principal parts of the Office of Pastors, are to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments.

‘But the method of teaching consists not merely in public addresses. It extends also to private admonitions. Thus Paul takes the Ephesians to witness, ‘I kept back nothing that was profitable to you, but have showed you and have taught you publicly and from house to house - testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.’

“A little after, he says: ‘Remember that for the space of three years, I did not cease to warn every one - night and day - with tears!’ Acts 20:20,31. Our present purpose, however, is not to enumerate the separate qualities of a good Pastor. It is only to indicate what those [duties are of those who] profess to call themselves Pastors. *Viz.*, that in presiding over the Church, they have no indolent dignity - but must train the people to true piety by the doctrine of Christ; administer the sacred mysteries; [and] preserve and exercise right discipline.”³⁸

The most important pastoral visit, is perhaps the routine call [of the Ruling Elder] on those Members of the Congregation which the Session assigns to his care. This is the routine call four times a year - before the quarterly celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Calvin got this practised in his Congregation at Strassburg. It involves the Ruling Elders engaging in ‘private conversation with each Communicant before Communion, so as to prepare and console his tormented conscience.”³⁹ If necessary, the Presbyter, though acting in tender love, should not hesitate in the Name of Christ the King of the Church to rebuke the carnal members of the Congregation.⁴⁰ For, as Calvin pointed out, ‘we must not offend God for the love of our neighbour!’⁴¹ On the other hand, the Elders should encourage even the weak Christians not to abstain from but rather to use the Lord’s Supper as medicine for their sick souls.”⁴²

The Ruling Pastors or Ruling Elders - and particularly the Preaching Elder or Preaching Pastor - should also, however, pay additional visits to all who have special needs. This is true especially when the parishioners are experiencing grief or joy.

‘Innumerable are the ills which beset human life arid present death in as many different

forms.... Go on board a ship - you are but a plank's breadth from death! Mount a horse - the stumbling of a foot endangers your life! Walk along the streets - every tile upon the roofs is a source of danger!... But when once the light of Divine Providence has illumined the believer's soul, he is relieved and set free not only from the extreme fear and anxiety which formerly oppressed him - but from all care! For as he justly shudders at the idea of chance, so he can confidently commit himself to God.....

“In one word, not to dwell longer on this, give heed - and you will at once perceive that ignorance of Providence is the greatest of all miseries; and the knowledge of it the highest happiness!”⁴³ Moreover, “if any believer finds himself anguished of heart by remorse for his sins, so that he cannot find rest without help from the outside - let him search out his Pastor and unburden himself of that which weighs upon his soul!”⁴⁴

On the other hand, the Elders should certainly congratulate and rejoice with the Members of the Congregation entrusted to their charge whenever the latter have good reason to be happy. When they celebrate a baptism, a marriage, or a promotion - their Elder(s) should surely share in their happiness and lead them to render thanks to Almighty God.

“Certainly,” observes Calvin,⁴⁵ “ivory and gold and riches are good creatures of God permitted - nay, destined - by Divine Providence, for the use of man! Nor was it ever forbidden to laugh; or to be full; or to add new to old and hereditary possessions; or to be delighted with music!”

The Elders should visit their charges especially when they are sick or dying. For “no one has learned in the school of Christ, if not he who awaits in joy and peace the day of his death.”⁴⁶ Accordingly, explains Calvin, “if any believer thinks himself about to leave this World - something which cannot happen without his being assailed and tormented by many temptations - it is fitting that he desire to be equipped to undergo the struggle.”⁴⁷

The Presbyters should come and pray for the dying, and even for the sick. For as the Apostle declared: “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the Elders of the Church! And let them pray over him, anointing him with [medicinal] oil in the Name of the Lord! And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up. And if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.... Let him know that he who converts the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death and shall hide a multitude of sins!”⁴⁸

Finally, to be of real help to his congregational charge, an Elder must be a man of great compassion. God alone can give such. And if we ask Him for it, He will indeed give us the sympathy we need with which to help alleviate the afflictions of others.

Calvin elucidates this, as follows: “While the Heavenly Physician treats some more gently, in the case of others He employs harsher remedies - His purpose being to provide a cure for all.”⁴⁹ “God has destined this end for all His children: so that they be conformed to Christ.... The more we are afflicted by misery, the more surely is our fellowship with Christ confirmed.”⁵⁰

Indeed, “even though we share what we call adversities with the unbeliever - yet, God

blesse those which we must undergo. He turns them to such a use, that we have always cause for consolation - and joy even in our sorrow.”⁵¹ For “the bitterness which is naturally to be found in the cross, must necessarily be tempered by spiritual joy.”⁵² And, adds Calvin, in his *Sermon on Job’s Friends*: “Let no man think himself capable of bringing consolation to those in trouble and distress, unless he himself bears their sufferings - that is to say, unless he puts himself in their place!”⁵³

Christ the great Shepherd and Bishop of our souls put Himself in our place and suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps.⁵⁴ Should His Presbyterian Undershepherds and Underbishops then not do likewise?

III. CALVIN THE IRENICIST

Calvin was an irenicist.⁵⁵ For he sought the peace of Christ’s Church. He did everything he could to give visible expression to the essential unity of all true Christians.⁵⁶ Indeed, he was the living embodiment of Augustine’s ideal for the Church: “In fundamentals - unity! In non-essentials - diversity! In all things - charity!”⁵⁷

Calvin the irenicist by no means limited his ministry to imperfect or even to backslidden Presbyterians. To the contrary, he always attempted to promote Christian peace among Non-Presbyterians too - be they Lutherans, Anabaptists, or Anglicans. For thus Calvin counseled his Fellow-“Calvinists.” He wrote to his Co-“Calvinist” Fellow-Preacher Heinrich Bullinger to forgive his Fellow-“Calvinist” the Preacher Martin Bucer - for (allegedly) wronging him.

But Calvin did far more than promote merely Presbyterian unity. For he wrote asking the “Calvinist” Preachers Bullinger and DuBois to reconcile themselves also with the Lutherans.⁵⁸

Indeed, John Calvin himself loved Luther’s right-hand man, the “Crypto-Calvinistic” German-Lutheran Philipp Melanchthon. While knowing and confessing “that we occupy widely different positions,” Calvin wrote to Philipp that he was not ignorant of the important place to which God had elevated Calvin himself in Geneva, so that “our friendship could not be interrupted without great injury to the Church” Universal.⁵⁹

On Philipp’s death, Calvin movingly wailed: “O Philipp Melanchthon!... I appeal to you who live in the presence of God with Christ, and wait for us there until we are united with you in the blessed rest.... I have wished a thousand times that it had been our lot together!”⁶⁰

Calvin’s relationship with Luther himself represents the epitome of Christian charity. The two never met. For Luther, differing with the Swiss-Reformed views on the nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper, adamantly refused to fellowship even with Calvin.

In his one and only known *Letter to Luther*, Calvin respectfully concluded: “Would that I could fly to you, that I might even for a few hours enjoy the happiness of your society! For I would prefer...to converse personally with yourself. But seeing that it is not granted to us on Earth, I hope that shortly it will come to pass in the Kingdom of God. Adieu, most renowned

sir, most distinguished Minister of Christ, and my ever-honoured father! May the Lord Himself rule and direct you by His Own Spirit, so that you may persevere even unto the end for the common good and benefit of His Own Church!”⁶¹

Even after that, Luther continued to fulminate against Calvin. For the latter found it necessary to complain of this ‘overbearing tyranny’ in a letter to Melanchthon reproaching Luther’s lack of concern for the public peace.⁶²

Yet Calvin nevertheless wrote to the ‘Calvinistic’ Bullinger: ‘I hear that Luther has at length broken forth in fierce invective, not so much against you as against the whole of us. But of this I do earnestly desire to put you in mind...that you would consider how eminent a man Luther is and the excellent endowments with which he is gifted.... Often have I been wont to declare that even though he were to call me a devil, I should still not the less hold him in such honour that I must acknowledge him to be an illustrious servant of God.’⁶³

No less different was Calvin’s attitude toward the Anabaptists. While forced to condemn their heretical doctrine of soul sleep⁶⁴ and their unscriptural rejection of the Biblical Sacrament of Infant Baptism and their ritualistic insistence on adult immersionism,⁶⁵ Calvin did not hesitate to marry a converted Anabaptist widow. Indeed, he even baptized their one viable child in its infancy - with the full consent and to the intense delight of his now ‘calvinized’ wife.

Calvin even desired to help the only semi-reformed Anglican Episcopalians. Archbishop Cranmer once wrote to Calvin asking him to come to a meeting in England with Melanchthon and Bullinger and others, in order to draw up a consensus creed for all of the Protestant Churches. Calvin immediately answered:

‘If men of learning conduct themselves with more reserve than is seemly, the very heaviest blame attaches to the leaders themselves who, either engrossed in their own sinful pursuits, are indifferent to the safety and entire purity of the Church - or who, individually satisfied with their own private peace, have no regard for others. Thus it is that the Members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding....

‘I wish indeed it could be brought about that men of learning and authority from the different churches should meet somewhere and, after thoroughly discussing the different articles of faith, should by a unanimous decision deliver down to posterity some certain rule of doctrine.... As to myself, if I should be thought of any use, I would not - if need be - object to cross ten seas for such a purpose. If the assisting of England alone were concerned, that would be motive enough for me. Much more, therefore, am I of opinion that I ought to grudge no labour or trouble - seeing that the object in view is an agreement among the learned to be drawn up by the weight of their authority according to Scripture, in order to unite churches seated far apart.’⁶⁶

This should not be taken to imply, however, that Calvin in any way whitewashed the ritualistic errors of Anglican Episcopalianism. To the contrary, he did not hesitate to advise the refugee English Church in Frankfurt: ‘Though in indifferent matters, such as external rites, I show myself indulgent and pliable, at the same time I do not deem it expedient always to

comply with the foolish captiousness of those who will not give up a single point of their usual rites. In the Anglican liturgy, as you describe it to me, I see that there were many silly things which might be tolerated.... The faults, however, which were not straightway corrected on the first day, if there lurked in them no manifest impiety, were to be endured for a time. Thus then it was lawful to begin from such rudiments; but still so that it might be proper for learned, grave and virtuous Ministers of Christ to proceed farther and prune away unsightly excrescences and aim at something purer.”⁶⁷

Calvin had no time, however, for the blasphemous crucifix with its illicitly sculptured representation of the naked and suffering figure of what purports to be Christ. For Calvin squarely condemns it.⁶⁸

His sermon on Deuteronomy 4:15-20, says it all:⁶⁹ ‘God has forbidden two things [cf. Exodus 20:4-5]. First, the making of any picture of Him.... The other is, that no image may be worshipped....

‘The setting up of images in churches, is a defiling.... By and by, folk go and kneel down to it.... The Papists...paint and portray ‘Jesus Christ’ [*sic!*] - Who (as we know) is not only man but also God manifested in the flesh. He is God’s eternal Son, in Whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells - yes, even substantially... Should we have portraiture and images, whereby only the flesh may be represented? Is it not a wiping away of that which is chiefest in our Lord Jesus Christ - that is, to wit, of His Divine Majesty? Yes!

“And therefore, whensoever a crucifix stands moping and mowing in the church - it is all one as if the Devil had defaced the Son of God. You see, then, that the Papists are destitute of all excuse.... They abuse their puppets and pictures, after that fashion.”

But what about the symbol of the plain cross? May the cross as such then not be used in church buildings?

Calvin freely admitted:⁷⁰ ‘I am not....so superstitious as to think that all visible representations of every kind are unlawful.... The only things...which ought to be painted or sculptured, are things which can be presented to the eye....

Visible representations are of two classes - *viz.*: historical, which give a representation of events; and pictorial, which merely exhibit bodily shapes and figures. The former are of some use for instruction or admonition.

However, it is ‘by the true preaching of the Gospel [that] Christ is portrayed and in a manner crucified before our eyes (Galatians 3:1). Of what use, then, were the erection in churches of so many crosses of wood and stone, silver and gold?’ What people need, is not the symbol of the cross - but the doctrine of Christ’s crucifixion. Would that ‘this doctrine were faithfully and honestly preached - *viz.*, Christ died that He might bear our curse upon the tree; so that He might expiate our sins by the sacrifice of His body, wash them in His blood, and (in short) reconcile us to God the Father! From this one doctrine the people would learn more than from a thousand crosses of wood and stone!’⁷¹

Calvin clearly understood the undesirability of using unreformed rites and ceremonies in worship services. In a *Letter to Knox*, he wrote: "I do not see for what reason a church should be burdened with these frivolous and useless, not to call them by their real name, pernicious ceremonies - when a pure and simple form of worship is in our power!"⁷²

It was sad indeed, observed Calvin, that "Philipp [Melanchthon] and [Martin] Bucer have drawn up ambiguous and insincere formulas concerning transubstantiation" - in an attempt to win moderate Romanists over to the Reformation. "I could not agree with this device - though they have, as they conceive, reasonable grounds for doing so." For they hope that in a short time sympathetically-minded moderate Romanists "would begin to see more clearly - if the doctrine shall be left an open question for the present."

For this reason, Melanchthon and Bucer "rather wish to skip over it, and do not dread the equivocation in matters of conscience." In fact, however, according to Calvin, "nothing can possibly be more hurtful" than this.⁷³

IV. CALVIN THE POLEMICIST

Calvin strove for unity among all Bible-believing Christians. He strove also for the destruction of all the errors of Rome. Yet even here, while indeed polemicizing, he was rarely unloving and never unfair.

On the matter of Romish transubstantiation, Calvin was particularly uncompromising. For the "mass," he observed, "offers the greatest insult to Christ.... This perverse course was unknown to the purer Church.... It is an abominable insult and intolerable blasphemy against Christ as well as the sacrifice which by His death He performed for us on the cross - for anyone to think of repeating the oblation!"⁷⁴ Indeed, "among all the Churches which have received the Evangel...the abomination of the mass must not continue!"⁷⁵

The Romish doctrine of the mass, then, was the watershed of the Calvinistic Reformation. For to Calvin,⁷⁶ "the question is not whether the Church suffers from many and grievous diseases (for this is admitted even by all moderate judges), but whether the diseases are of a kind whose cure admits of no longer delay - so that it is neither useful nor proper to wait upon too slow remedies."⁷⁶

Indeed, "charity ought to be subservient to the purity of faith. It behooves us...to have regard to charity; but we must not offend God for the love of our neighbour!"⁷⁷

The simple fact is that "the churches governed by the ordinances of the Pope, are rather synagogues of the devil than Christian Churches." Indeed, the Romish mass is especially reprehensible.⁷⁸

At the same time, even though the Papacy is Antichrist, Romanism nevertheless still maintains some vestiges of a Church.⁷⁹ For this very reason, then, Calvin never ceased trying to reform the Romish Church - even while exposing all her pernicious errors.

On one occasion, the Romish Cardinal Sadoletto craftily invited the city of Geneva to come back into the papal fold - right after that city it had unjustly expelled Calvin, who had been its Protestant Pastor. Calvin nevertheless still loved the people of Geneva - and even Sadoletto. For he then wrote to both of them from his exile in Strassburg:

‘My conscience told me how strong was the zeal with which I burned for the unity of the Church, provided the truth were made the bond of concord.... May the Lord grant, Sadoletto, that you and all your party may at length perceive that the only true bond of ecclesiastical unity consists in this - that Christ the Lord...gather us out of our present dispersion into the fellowship of His body, so that through His one Word and Spirit we may join together with one heart and soul!’⁸⁰

This magnificent gesture so commended itself to the fickle Genevans, that they recalled Calvin as their Pastor. God made him willing to accept that recall. Then, when he was at length in firm and undisputed control of his congregation, Calvin invited even the treacherous Sadoletto into his home as his guest. For the gracious Reformer strongly desired to win even the Romish Cardinal fully for Christ.

Calvin was gracious also to the Crypto-Protestant Romanists alias the ‘Nicodemites.’ These were Christians who, like Nicodemus of old,⁸¹ were secretly believers in Protestantism. Accepting the Protestant doctrines in their hearts, they were afraid of breaking with Rome openly. So they continued outwardly to observe the papal mass - while inwardly rejecting it.

Such Nicodemites were firmly evangelized by Calvin. In 1537, he wrote to his friend the Nicodemite Nicholas du Chemin.

Calling him ‘my dear brother,’ Calvin urged him ‘to be unwilling to be yoked with unbelievers.’ For although God ‘does not wish Christians to be so averse to all connections with unbelievers as to have no civil contracts,’ the Lord ‘does not permit’ believers ‘to form any alliance’ with unbelievers ‘which may ensnare believers into an imitation of their superstitions.’

Consequently, all those Romish ceremonies ‘which bear the smallest imprint of sacrilege - you are no more to touch than you would the venom of a serpent!.... Consider it a thing altogether interdicted to allow any man to see you communicating in the sacrilege of the mass.... Your part is now to render to the Lord the confession of praise which He demands of you - to exhort yourself to be instant and urgent, to arouse and collect your courage.’⁸²

However, Calvin was also very tender in his polemic against the Nicodemites. In 1543, he wrote his *Little Treatise Showing what a Faithful Man who knows the Truth of the Gospel ought to do when he is among Papists*.

In that writing, Calvin most sympathetically remarked ‘that so far am I from lightly blaming my poor brethren who are in such bonds, I would far rather, out of mere pity and mercy, find arguments by which to excuse them.... So far also am I from not considering them as brothers, that I praise them in all other respects before God and man, and hold them as more deserving than myself to have a place in the Church.’

However, when these Nicodemites thanklessly complained that Calvin had treated them harshly - he issued his 1544 *Defence to the Nicodemites*. In that *Defence*, Calvin strongly reprehended their compromise. But as a Christian, he still called upon them to surrender fully to the Lord - and to come over all the way to Protestantism.

Particularly moving is Calvin's polemic against two of his own former friends. They were the renegade Ex-Protestants, Louis du Tillet and Gerard Roussel. For, upon being promised bishoprics - they had gone right back into the Roman fold!

While acknowledging that a Christian remnant still remained in Rome, Calvin insisted that she was not the True Church. Then the Reformer solemnly told the Romish Bishop DuTillet that he himself would never go back to Rome. For - Luke 9:62 - as Jesus had said: 'No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God!'⁸³

To his other erstwhile friend, the Romish Bishop Roussel, Calvin remarked: 'It is the duty of pastors to teach. If you have either to admonish or to exhort, it is your duty to proceed with simple affection - with a gentleness and solicitude like that which the peasant shows to his flocks.' But: 'Answer me conscientiously, you superintendent and chief in the affairs of religion! With what faithfulness, do you labour to restore that which is decayed?''⁸⁴

V. CALVIN THE EVANGELIST

Calvin desired that all categories of men should be saved - be they citizens of Geneva, fellow Frenchmen, European kings and queens, humble cobblers, foreign correspondents - or even heathen in Brazil. For Calvin wanted to expand Christ's little flock and to encourage it throughout the World. Indeed, he remarked how 'necessary it is now, in the dreadful devastation of the Christian World, that those Churches which worship God rightly, few and dispersed and hedged about by the profane synagogues of Antichrist as they are, should be incited to that fraternal embrace.'⁸⁵

Such could not be the case, however, in respect of heretics, apostates, and pagans. For those categories needed to be evangelized before they could be given a 'fraternal embrace.' And nowhere do we see this more clearly than in Calvin's evangelizing of that arch-heretic, Michael Servetus.

Servetus had blasphemously described the most blessed Trinity as a three-headed dog and a monster from hell. Yet even at a time when the Catholic Inquisition was seeking to slay Servetus, and every Protestant city in Europe had expelled him or condemned him, Calvin still corresponded with him and even sent him a copy of his *Institutes*. For Calvin sought to win Servetus to Christ.

Knowing full well that Calvin favoured the punishment of exile for heretics and the death penalty for blasphemers,⁸⁶ the wretched Servetus arrogantly made his way to Geneva - planning to overthrow Calvin, and to de-christianize the city. Put on trial by the civil magistrates of Geneva (and not by Calvin who was neither a judge nor as yet a citizen of that city), Servetus was found guilty of blasphemy and sedition and sentenced to death by burning.

Calvin unsuccessfully tried to get Servetus to recant his errors. When Servetus would not recant, Calvin pleaded for a milder form of punishment. And later still, Calvin also pleaded with Servetus in his death cell to get right with God and accept the Divine Christ as his Lord and Master.

Rarely in the annals of history has so much evangelical concern ever been shown to such a monstrous miscreant - as Calvin showed to Michael Servetus, enemy of Christianity and of public law and order. Even during that highly intolerant age, the gentle Calvin tenderly yet firmly presented Christ and His salvation to the very man who had sought to destroy him.

For Calvin was determined to evangelize all who crossed his path. In Geneva, he frequently distributed tracts to strangers in the market-place. At the same time, he interceded for "the poor consciences" of his French "compatriots who hungered and thirsted after Jesus Christ." For he felt himself to be "a prisoner with them."⁸⁷

Calvin witnessed to the humblest cobblers, and to the highest kings and queens. He did not hesitate to warn King Francis of France that "he who does not make his reign subservient to the divine glory, acts the part not of a king, but of a robber!" Nor did he neglect to warn the Duchess Rena de Ferrara that "hatred and Christianity are incompatible."⁸⁸

Even kings and queens respected him. Yet, as Preacher Fornelet pointed out to Calvin: "Even the most scorned of men can address himself familiarly to you as a messenger of God."⁸⁹

Consider some of Calvin's evangelical correspondence with ordinary people miles away from his parish of Geneva. These were people to whom he owed no pastoral duty whatsoever.

To one Monsieur de Falais, a man with a sick son, Calvin wrote: "It pains me not to be able to be with you, at least for half a day, to laugh with you, even while trying to make that little child [of yours] laugh - though he but cries and weeps."⁹⁰

Another stranger, Monsieur de Richebourg, had lost a child. To him, Calvin wrote: "All that I am saying to you is designed to make you moderate and temper your most just sorrow so that, having shed the tears which result from human nature and from your paternal feelings, you do not end by taking pleasure in your grief."⁹¹

Then there was the worried gentleman of Turin, whose baby had died unbaptized. To him, the Reformer wrote: "Do not fear! But rely boldly on God's promise: 'I am the God of your seed!'"⁹²

Of all the Reformers, Calvin was the only one who sponsored missions to unbaptized heathen as a means of evangelizing the whole World. Well known is Calvin's intense interest in and promotion of the missionary expedition of two Genevan Calvinists. In 1556, together with a party of colonists under the leadership of Villagagnon, Preachers (Revs. de Lery and Richier) set out to evangelize Brazil's Indians. For, as Calvin had insisted: "May the souls so dearly purchased by the blood of our Lord, not perish by our carelessness!"⁹³

In his *Commentaries*, Calvin made it clear⁹⁴ that the Kingdom of Christ is to expand World-wide - before the Second Coming. Relative to the Great Commission given by Christ to His Apostles,⁹⁵ Calvin insisted: "The nature of the apostolic function is clear from the command, 'Go into all the World, and preach the Gospel to every creature!' Mark 16:15. No fixed limits are given them, but the whole World is assigned to be reduced under the obedience of Christ - so that by spreading the Gospel as widely as they could, they might everywhere erect His Kingdom."⁹⁶

Nor was this Commission limited only to the Apostles. For World-wide evangelization demands at least the indirect participation of all Christians in the Church's mission to the nations. Indeed, explained Calvin, "It is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation. While we exhort and encourage others, we must not at the same time sit down in indolence; but it is proper that we set an example before others!"⁹⁷

Calvin concludes: "God therefore sets up His Kingdom by humbling the whole World.... We should desire this to be done every day, in order that God may gather churches to Himself from all quarters of the World, [and] may extend and increase their numbers.... God will be King in the World, when all shall subject themselves to His will!"⁹⁸

Calvin witnessed to all men. For Calvin loved all men. "In each man," he wrote, "the Lord wants us to see His image which is imprinted therein."⁹⁹ Furthermore, "because we do not know who belongs to the number of the predestinated, or does not belong - our desire ought to be that all may be saved. And hence, every person we meet, we will desire to be a partaker of peace - with us."¹⁰⁰

"The purpose of man," declared the Reformer, "is to be a servant of all."¹⁰¹ For "our Saviour, having shown in the parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10:36) that the term neighbour comprehends the most remote stranger - there is no reason for [our] limiting the precept of love to our own connections.

"I do not deny that the closer the relationship, the more frequent our offices of kindness should be. For the condition of humanity requires that there be more duties in common between those who are more nearly connected by the ties of relationship, or friendship, or neighbourhood.... But I say that the [members of the] whole human race without exception are to be embraced with one feeling of charity.... Therefore, if we would hold the true course in love, our first step must be to turn our eyes not to man (the sight of whom might oftener produce hatred than love!) - but to God Who requires that the love which we bear to Him be diffused among all mankind so that our fundamental principle must ever be: 'Let a man be what he may - he is still to be loved, because God is to be loved.'"¹⁰²

Calvin made many enemies - for Christ's sake. But he loved them all. Even in the worst of them, he perceived some remnant of the image of God.¹⁰³

The motto of John Calvin's life, was: "My heart, O Lord, I offer as a sacrifice to God - promptly and sincerely!"¹⁰⁴ How then could he not love man as God's image - fallen though that image be?

No wonder, then, that the dying Dr. Calvin could truly declare on his deathbed in 1564: "I never wrote anything against anyone in hatred. And I always kept before me, what I thought would redound to the glory of God."¹⁰⁵

Thus lived and died John Calvin - true Presbyterian, true Pastor, true Irenicist, true Polemicist, and true Evangelist. May we too then resolve, by the grace of Jesus Christ, to live and die like that first Calvinistic Reformer and Reconstructor of true Presbyterianism!

Dear reader! Just what kind of a Calvinist and true Presbyterian - are you?

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- 5) *Cf.* I Pet. 5:3.
- 6) John 21:15-17.
- 7) *Institutes* IV:1:2-3.
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- 19) *Inst.* III:2:25.
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- 38) *Inst.* IV:3:6.
- 39) *Opera Calvini* XI,41.
- 40) Tit. 1:5-13 *cf.* I Tim, 1:7-12 & 3:1-5.
- 41) *Inst.* III:19:13.
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